



HOW TO MAKE A SECRET MOVIE

J.J. ABRAMS KNOWS A THING OR TWO ABOUT KEEPING FILM DETAILS UNDER WRAPS, BUT WITH **10 CLOVERFIELD LANE** (OUT MARCH 11)—AN EERIE COMPANION TO HIS 2008 MONSTER SMASH—HE'S OUTDONE HIMSELF.

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NONE OF US KNEW IT WAS COMING. EVEN THE TRAILER,

which dropped last month before the first late-night screenings of Michael Bay's *13 Hours*, seemed innocuous...at first. "I Think We're Alone Now" plays on a jukebox. John Goodman, Mary Elizabeth Winstead, and John Gallagher Jr. can be seen relaxing at home. Suddenly, a tremor runs through the house. Or is it a bunker? A fist slams. A broken bottle slashes. Flames. An escape attempt. And then two title cards that change our perception of everything we've seen.



John Goodman, Mary Elizabeth Winstead, and John Gallagher Jr. in *10 Cloverfield Lane*

The first: “From Producer J.J. Abrams.” The second: “*10 Cloverfield Lane*.”

Just like that, eight years after the found-footage monster movie *Cloverfield* scared up more than \$170 million worldwide, it reentered the culture the same way it arrived back in 2008—with zero advance warning. “We kept it quiet because we knew we wanted to try something unusual,” Abrams says now. “Something unusual doesn’t always work, but at least it’s unusual.”

At a time when social media has all but ensured that secrets don’t stay that way for long, Abrams and the team at his production company Bad Robot have waged war on teases, leaks, and spoilers. With *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, they kept plot details away from anyone who didn’t explicitly go looking for them, but for *10 Cloverfield Lane*, they upped the ante and presented a movie no one knew existed. How in the hell did they do that?

Like all great mysteries, it started with a simple clue—a code name. News articles from April 2014 announced a green light for *Valencia*, a Bad Robot production to be directed by up-and-comer Dan Trachtenberg. There was even a brief but accurate (from what we can tell) plot synopsis: After a severe car accident, a young woman wakes up in a cellar. The man who saved her from the wreckage explains that she can’t leave because of a chemical attack on the surface.

But *10 Cloverfield Lane* actually began as *The Cellar*, a script by Josh Campbell and Matthew Stuecken that Bad Robot reportedly bought back in 2012 and developed, with the help of a rewrite by *Whiplash* director Damien Chazelle, into what Abrams now calls a “blood relative” of *Cloverfield*. By the time Trachtenberg came aboard, the project—rechristened *Valencia*—had found its place in what he refers to as the “Clover-verse.”

What that means exactly—does the term “Clover-verse” imply that this is the beginning of some underground franchise?—is the question racing through the mind of every Easter-egg-obsessed fan in the lead-up to *Lane*’s March 11 release. While Abrams won’t get any more specific than promising “literal connections” between the two films, he’s quick to point out what we won’t see. “Anyone who is expecting to see literally *Cloverfield 2*—those characters and that monster are not in this movie,” he says. “But there are other characters and other monsters.”

Based on the 20 minutes of footage screened for EW, the similarities between the two films lie mostly in their tone. Both drop emotionally distressed characters into a possibly supernatural, and certainly dangerous, situation, with touches of humor and lightness. Beyond that, the connection is enigmatic—even, apparently, to its cast.

“*Valencia*” filmed for 36 days in New

Orleans, where cast members were never made fully aware of what they were making and where copies of the script were heavily watermarked and printed on red paper, making it impossible to photocopy. Actor Gallagher (*Short Term 12*) remembers first hearing the word “Cloverfield” partway through production, but even now he isn’t sure when that change happened. “Maybe this was the idea from the beginning and I was late to the equation,” he says. If so, his costar Winstead (*The Spectacular Now*) was even later; she says she found out the movie’s final title just hours before the trailer hit theaters.

So will a strategy of revealing nothing in advance really work in our instant-gratification culture? The secretive drop, while still a minor trend, has worked for the likes of J.K. Rowling with *The Cuckoo’s Calling* and Louis C.K. with *Horace and Pete* (see sidebar), and after Beyoncé’s self-titled album in 2013 and more recently with “Formation,” it’s become the singer’s MO. With the help of fake titles, incomplete scripts, and unannounced trailers, Abrams and team have succeeded in hiding their movie in plain sight. For Abrams, this kind of nonmarketing mirrors his own brand of storytelling. “I find that stories do well when they make me want to know more,” he says. “The stories that work make you lean in and ask questions.” So here’s the major one: How big will this Clover-verse get? “There’s a larger conceit that we’re playing with,” Abrams says. “This is just this movie, and it’s only two films that we’re talking about right now, but there is something else that we’d like to do, and hopefully we’ll get a shot.” Surely when we least expect it. ♦

HOW TO MAKE A SECRET TV SHOW



For his surprise new Web series *Horace and Pete*, Louis C.K. has nearly out-Abrams’d J.J. Abrams. The comedian debuted the first episode without any announcement at all. It just...showed up. By creating and independently financing the series (which costars Steve Buscemi and C.K., above, as owners of a bar and features Jessica Lange, Alan Alda, and Edie Falco), C.K. gained complete creative control—and opted to do zero promotion for it: no trailers,

no ads. Why? As he explained in an open letter posted on his site, that kind of marketing will “tell you what the show feels and looks like before you get to see it for yourself.” His other motivation was timeliness. Episodes contain references to real-life events that have occurred not long before each show’s release. “I’m making this show as you’re watching it,” he said on his site. He’s just not talking about it.

—KEVIN P. SULLIVAN